

Tragedy of Cambodia unfolds in the sounds

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Greg Barron at the Thailand-Cambodia border

PBS to resurrect 'Paper Chase'

HOLLYWOOD (UPI)—"Paper Chase," ignominiously canceled at the end of last year's television season, will be exhumed in September.

The Public Broadcasting Service has bought 23 of the 24 "Paper Chase" episodes and will air them, along with five new segments.

"Paper Chase" was testimony to the adage that long-lived "quality television" is a contradiction in terms. It was universally praised as a rare combination of art and entertainment.

Critics loved the show. Intellectuals doted on it. But most viewers—devotees of "Laverne and Shirley"—ignored it.

"Paper Chase" occupied the Nielsen ratings' cellar week after week, losing out to inferior shows.

But the cast will be reassembled this spring for at least five more episodes. And if "Paper Chase" creates the same sort of excitement stirred by "Upstairs, Downstairs" on PBS a few years ago, the series may become a PBS regular.

"Trampled Grass: Notes on 16 Days Between the Border and Bangkok" is Greg Barron's latest audio documentary for Minnesota Public Radio (7 tonight, KSJN-FM, 91.1).

That, more than its subject, makes the program noteworthy, because "Trampled Grass" is about the Cambodian crisis. Little about MPR's sojourn to Southeast Asia differs from those of the seven other Twin Cities news teams, whose reports we've already read and seen.

Barron's audio journalism is among the most vivid and imaginative in the nation. Drama and suggestion characterize his radio documentaries (you might call them docu-dramas, except they are indisputably journalism). His last program, "The Way to 8-H," was a harrowing report on how people are committed to mental wards in Hennepin County.

"Trampled Grass" relies on narration—frequently in the form of a personal journal—more than usual because of the language barrier. In Thailand refugee border camps, Cambodian and Thai tongues buzz almost constantly in the background, sometimes drowning out interviews in the foreground.

Unfortunately, the cacophony doesn't suggest the thousands of souls creating it, perhaps because their language is gibberish to us, and gibberish from a dozen people sounds about like gibberish from 12,000. The result is that all voices, American and otherwise, grow vaguely tiresome midway through the hour.

Yet the program contains some eerie, unshakable moments. We hear the refugees rasp, hack and convulse in a chilling chorus. More exotic: the contrasting milieu of hedonistic Bangkok. Barron has us almost tasting the city in the music and street noise he brought home.

The sounds are better than the words in "Trampled Grass" (that title, for instance, only hints at the cause of the suffering). But the sounds speak so well. They let Barron's chronicle of the Cambodian tragedy unfold in the mind.